Opposition party member beaten to death by ruling party youth

In mid-May 2021, information started to circulate about the violent death of a man known as Rasta, in Bubanza province. Little by little, details of the events that led to his death were revealed.

At about 3 am on 14 May 2021, a resident on a remote hill in Bubanza province awoke to screams of men shouting “thief!” Carrying a flashlight and a machete for protection, he followed the shouts, until he came upon local Imbonerakure (youths from the ruling party) beating Rasta, a member of the opposition party Congrès national pour la liberté (CNL). “Don’t you see you’re hurting him?” he asked two of the Imbonerakure, whom he knew. “You could get into trouble.”

The Imbonerakure ignored the man’s pleas and one of them asked him for his machete. When he refused to give it to him, the Imbonerakure joined the others and continued beating Rasta with dry palm branches, claiming he had stolen a few ears of corn that were in his bag. They also kicked and punched him, yelling “beat this CNL idiot!” and “pull out his teeth!” even as Rasta told them he’d been given the corn.
Rasta was a drifter, a homeless man known only by his nickname. His parents were from the area, but both had died years earlier, and he had largely been disowned by his extended family. As a CNL member, he was a volunteer at the CNL local party office, sweeping and maintaining the grounds, cutting grass and washing windows. *Imbonerakure* had urged him to join the ruling party in the past, but he had always refused.

It is unclear if Rasta’s political affiliation was the reason for the attack, even if the *Imbonerakure* knew he was a CNL member. A man knowledgeable about the events said: “I have never seen anyone killed for stealing in all the years I have spent here... Rasta was punished in this way because of his political affiliation.”

After beating him, some of the *Imbonerakure* took Rasta to a local police position. The policeman on duty refused to take him into custody because of his serious injuries and ordered the *Imbonerakure* to take him to a health centre. The *Imbonerakure* dropped Rasta off at a local administrative office next to the police post, and left.

Later that morning, a crowd gathered around Rasta. His mouth was bloody and he had difficulty talking. In pain, he whispered the names of some of the *Imbonerakure* who had beaten him: Félix, Désiré, Nyenimana and a local *Imbonerakure* nicknamed Vyanka.

Not long after, the *chef de colline* (local official), Emmanuel Ndayiragije, helped Rasta to a health centre, but the person in charge refused to admit him. He said he wouldn’t be able to explain to the authorities how a person in Rasta’s state had died at the health centre.

Witnesses confirmed that Rasta had been seriously injured. He could barely speak or stand and his body was covered with wounds. His genitals were swollen, presumably from the beating. The health centre did not treat him, but an employee of a local pharmacy took pity on him and gave him an injection to revive him.

Ndayiragije and a few *Imbonerakure* took Rasta to a nearby school and left him alone on the porch. Sometime during the night, Rasta died. His body was found the next morning at the local office of the ruling party, the *Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (CNDD-FDD). It’s unclear how he got there.

On 15 May, residents, including at least one *Imbonerakure* leader, put Rasta’s body in a sack and carried it to a local cemetery, where they buried him. “He was buried like a dog,” is how one resident described it. After the burial, *Imbonerakure* started collecting money in the market for *gukaraba*, the Burundian traditional practice of drinking beer after a burial. CNL members quickly intervened. A resident recalled a CNL member saying indignantly: “How is it that you didn’t collect money to buy a coffin to bury him in a dignified manner, but you collect money to drink? No, that’s enough!”

Before Rasta’s death, a former local official and CNDD-FDD member, Emmanuel Nimpagaritse, seemed to sanction violence by *Imbonerakure*. Two days before the attack, he spoke up during a security meeting:
“You see that these days, there are a lot of cases of criminality. From now on, if you catch a thief, beat or kill him.”

A person who attended the meeting later said: “We took (Nimpagaritse’s words) as a call to violence. And there you go, two days later, Rasta was killed. If you ask me, that was an order by (Nimpagaritse) to the Imbonerakure.”

After Rasta’s death, the police initially showed a willingness to hold those involved to account. The day Rasta was buried, Édouard Mukoko, the provincial police commissioner of Bubanza, said: “I can’t understand how someone can be beaten to death in a village and the incident is ignored. The perpetrators should be identified and punished. The chef de colline is in charge of his area and he should take responsibility for whatever happens there.”

The next day, the police commissioner of Mpanda commune arrested Emmanuel Ndayiragije, the chef de colline of the area where Rasta had been killed. Ndayiragije spent one night in the police detention centre in Mpanda. The following day, he was released, reportedly after the provincial governor intervened and said he was not involved in the incident.

A judicial police officer asked Ndayiragije after his release if he knew who was responsible for beating Rasta. Ndayiragije revealed the names of five Imbonerakure who were allegedly involved, and the officer gave him arrest warrants to serve to them, a common practice in Burundi. The provincial police commissioner told Ndayiragije to find them “any way possible.”

By that time, however, the Imbonerakure who had attacked Rasta had already fled the area and their whereabouts were unknown.

A local ruling party official had other ideas. Rather than trying to make sure the Imbonerakure were brought to justice, he said that they would soon return home and that Ndayiragije should not deliver the arrest warrants. The local official made it clear that the provincial governor, the CNDD-FDD provincial head in Bubanza and the administrator of Mpanda had all been informed about the decision that the Imbonerakure should be allowed to return, that the arrest warrants should not be delivered and that they should not be arrested. He also allegedly told them that they should give the impression that investigations were continuing.

By the end of July 2021, all five Imbonerakure were back in the area. A resident said they had returned with “more force” and that they had soon started patrolling, often at night, carrying sticks and questioning residents. “People living here know they should not go home late (for fear of running into them),” said a resident in Mpanda.

In late December 2021, a resident of the hill where Rasta died said that Imbonerakure – including some of those who beat him – were conducting security checks, which included stopping and detaining residents, accusing them of going home late. The Imbonerakure involved in these patrols claimed it was hard for them to distinguish ordinary residents from criminals. Some of the residents they arrested paid the Imbonerakure to be released. Some government officials consider Bubanza to be a sensitive province.
because it borders the Democratic Republic of Congo and has been the site of incursions by armed opponents in recent years.

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) wrote to the governor of Bubanza asking what action the authorities had taken following Rasta’s death and why the warrants to arrest the *Imbonerakure* suspected of involvement were not served. BHRI also wrote to the prosecutor of Bubanza and asked whether he had opened an investigation into the case. Neither official replied.

For further information about the series, read “The Deadly Price of Opposition”.